



Mountain Bike Trails Public Scoping Notes

Big Bend Mountain Bike Trails Scoping Meeting
Sul Ross University, Lawrence Hall
Alpine, TX
January 30, 2006
22 participants

"GROUP MEMORY"

Desired Outcome: To understand public sentiment towards expanding mountain bicycling opportunities within Big Bend National Park.

Background and NPS Position

- On March 17, 2006, the National Park Service and the International Mountain Bicycling Association (IMBA) signed a general agreement with the goal of "providing high quality bicycling opportunities for visitors to enjoy the national park system, in appropriate areas in a manner consistent with our stewardship responsibilities."
- The agreement encourages the NPS to cooperate with IMBA and affiliate organizations to identify mutually beneficial projects or activities. (Copies were made available)
- Following the signing of the agreement, the Big Bend Trails Alliance asked the NPS to consider expanding mountain bicycle opportunities within the National Park..
- Big Bend National Park investigated becoming a "pilot park" for the purposes of this agreement.
- The Park has already received approximately 100 email comments on this project.

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- Expanding mountain bicycling opportunities requires compliance with NEPA (National Environmental Policy Act) and rule making.
- Internal and external public scoping initiates the NEPA process. A public scoping letter was broadly distributed (copies available)
- A contractor will be hired to complete an environmental assessment (EA) that develops a range of alternatives.
- The formal EA begins after the initial scoping. Ample opportunities for civic engagement in developing alternatives will be included in the workplan.
- The Park did not have staff or funding to initiate the Environmental Assessment. Several organizations and the NPS Intermountain Region are providing the necessary funds. Bikes Belong Coalition - \$10,000, IMBA - \$2000, NPS - \$8000, Big Bend Trails Alliance -- \$1500+

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- Big Bend National Park is already open to mountain bicycle use. Bike riding is restricted to paved (120

miles) and unpaved roads (180 miles).

- This planning process will explore the feasibility of expanding bike riding.

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- Bicycle riding within National Parks must comply with the Code of Federal Regulations (36 CFR 4.30) and all other applicable laws, regulations, and policies of the NPS.
- Proposed bike use on all other routes within developed zone, and administrative roads outside of developed zones will require analysis, including public comment, and decision pursuant to NEPA. Any proposed routes that are not within developed zones must be promulgated as special regulations.
- If the EA finds new mountain bicycling opportunities are acceptable, the NPS will have to pursue rule changes.
- NPS Management Policies (2001) reference off-road bicycling. Each unit must develop special park specific regulations.
- The Wilderness Act places some additional constraints on mountain bicycle trails in Big Bend. Of the 801,000 acres in the Park, approximately 500,000 are proposed as wilderness. Under the Wilderness Act, proposed wilderness designations are treated as wilderness until Congress makes a final determination.
- Mechanized and motorized equipment is prohibited in wilderness areas.

The NPS does not have a position on this issue. The Park will complete its investigation. There is no pre-determined outcome.

### Questions & Answers on NPS Position

- Q.Who designs special regulations for the park?

A. A regulations coordinator in Washington DC would be lead. Park would work with the coordinator on specific language. The Assistant Secretary for Fish, Wildlife and Parks would approve the regulation. An approval would have to be published in the Federal Register.

- Q.What's the timeline?

A.It really depends on the level of controversy.

- Q.Are the wilderness zones managed by special designation or because the NPS does not have funds to do otherwise.

A.The wilderness zones were established through park planning processes. The NPS is required by law to manage as de-facto wilderness until Congress either formally declares wilderness or removes the land from further consideration.

- Q.What is the rationale for the large pink/purple zones.

A.The dark purple represents developed or proposed developed areas. Old power/telephone line corridors taken out of wilderness zones. If powerlines are decharged and removed, corridors could be suitable for wilderness.

- Comment: Concern that Secretary Norton could abolish wilderness study areas.
- Comment: Big Bend Tourism Council is also raising community funds to support planning and compliance.
- Q.The general agreement mentions two pilot projects, yet a news release from IMBA discusses 12 partnership efforts. Did the agreement expand?

A.There are three pilot projects – Big Bend, Cuyahoga National Recreation Area (near Cleveland, OH), and Fort Dupont Park (near Washington, DC). Other collaborative efforts include requests from park units for IMBA/Subaru Trail Care Crew visits or for more information regarding the NPS/IMBA agreement.

- Q.Of the 100 emails, what is the breakdown in support of or opposed to mountain bicycling in the Park.

A.The vast majority of comments are in favor of expanded mountain bicycling. However, IMBA released an

“action alert” encouraging members to submit comments.

- Comment: IMBA members have promoted additional mountain bicycling opportunities within NPS units.

## Public Comments

### *Wishes*

- Access to more natural type experience away from traffic. Narrow single track trails – minimum resource damage
- General support for more single track trails within the park.
- Some roads not appropriate because riders have to share with vehicles. Separated trails can achieve a nice surface. Park roads don't provide a great experience, especially if the roads are washboarded.
- Trails could be developed multi-use. Users could segregate themselves based on predominate uses.
- Trails are built sustainable. Bicyclists prefer to ride them and not continually work on them.
- Additional trails bring an economic development perspective. Promoting individual activities – people will travel a great distance to ride great singletrack. It also provides another attraction for off-season use.
- There is a great deal of community support. This will encourage appropriate use.
- Comment: A park user could spend five days on a big circuit, and placing trails in existing road corridors would allow for bicycle support services.

### *Worries*

- Concerns about mountain bicyclists interfering with hikers. What is the width of the single track trails being proposed.

Responses: Good site lines along the trail allow for user interaction. Education programs and effective signage such as IMBAs “Yield to Users” triangle sign.

Responses: Suggest user conflicts will be extremely low. Single track trails are 1-3 feet.

- Q: Are there currently trail standards within the Park?

A: Stock trails are generally hardened and are 5' wide. Hiking trails vary from 18-24 inches. Chisos Basin trails generally wider due to historic stock use.

- Texas State Parks has adopted a shared-use trail concept. The NPS should use state parks as a resource.

- Q: Who will build, maintain and manage all the new trails? Is IMBA going to pay?

A: Response from Big Bend Trails Alliance:

- There is a strong ethic from users to maintain the trails. The Park will be primarily in charge. A national mountain bike patrol could be established and offer visitor assistance and perform resource monitoring. External funds have to be found.

- Comment: Texas State Parks have many volunteer built trails.

- Comment: Many wilderness advocates do not trust the current Administration. The fear is wilderness designations will be lost or removed. Wilderness advocates do not see anything that prevents NPS from moving non-wilderness lines to accommodate mountain bicycling. There is a fear that allowing mountain bicycle use could be a first step to remove wilderness designation (administrative).

- Comment: Mountain bicyclists are very uncomfortable about gaining access to public lands based on administration policies. Mountain bicyclists do not want access to wilderness and we are generally allies with wilderness advocates.

- The NPS wilderness map does have designated lines.

- Comment: Public comments suggest an “offer to help” NPS plan, establish and maintain new trails.

- Comment: The Sierra Club and IMBA signed an agreement in 1994 and it has since been revised. The Sierra Club is in favor of considering mountain bike use in non-wilderness areas. The Sierra Club policy also

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favors a monitoring process to address resource damage.

- Comment: Texas State Parks has addressed many Sierra Club policy concerns.

- Q. Will park have to assess corridors for historic/cultural/natural features? Will compliance have to be completed?

A. Yes, trail corridors will have full evaluation. The park Interdisciplinary Team (IDT) has expert resources which would be used.

- Comment: There is no standard width for non-wilderness road corridors. Widths typically determined by geographical features.

- Q. What determined wilderness areas?

A. General criteria included a roadless area of 5000 acres or more

- Q. Will the public get a chance to comment further?

A. The Environmental Assessment process will provide other opportunities. It will layout several alternatives for the public to consider. Citizen input into the EA could include visiting with IMBA/Subaru Trail Care Crew and getting involved on field visits to existing corridors. The EA needs to be an inclusive process.

### **What, Who**

- The General Management Plan mailing list was used for public scoping letter. Also Big Bend contacted non-governmental organizations, media, and congressional offices.

### **NEXT STEPS**

- Scoping with 30 day public comment
- Formal public involvement when Draft EA is completed
- Difficult to place timeline on final rule. Too many unknowns.